Dropouts

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When students drop out of school, the course of their lives may be totally reset. Dropouts typically earn less than their peers with more education, and they are more likely than high school graduates to end up in prison. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's **American Community Survey**, the population of U.S. 18- through 24-year-olds not enrolled in school and without a high school diploma or General Educational Development, or GED, credential was 16.4 percent in 2009.

The economic value attached to completion of ever-greater levels of education is well documented. In 2009, adults ages 25 and older who had dropped out of school or had not acquired a GED earned up to 41 percent less than those who had completed high school or had GEDs, census data show. The gap widened when comparing the incomes of high school dropouts with people with bachelor's degrees. In 2009, male and female college graduates earned $57,714 and $39,263 respectively, while male and female high school dropouts earned $21,629 and $13,943, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

But the value of a high school education cannot be measured in dollars alone. Among 16- to 24-year-olds who were incarcerated during 2006-07, only 1 in 1,000 had a bachelor's degree, while 6.3 percent were high school dropouts who didn't have a GED. (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin & Palma, 2009).

Calculating Dropout Rates

There are several different ways to calculate and report dropout rates, although the 2010-11 school year is the first in which states, districts, and schools must report their high school graduation rates based on a common method in which cohorts of students entering 9th grade are tracked through graduation. In the 2011-12 year, the four-year adjusted cohort rate will be used for federal accountability under the No Child Left Behind law.

Other methods of calculating and reporting dropout rates may generate vastly different results. A state may report one set of numbers suggesting a low dropout rate; then, a private organization might analyze the

statistics using a different measure and accuse the state or school system of underestimating the problem. Here are some of the different ways of calculating dropout rates:

Status Rate: This reports the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential. Status rates reveal the extent of the dropout problem in the population, and are therefore used to estimate the need for further education and training designed to help dropouts participate fully in the economy and broader life of the nation.

Event Rate: This estimates the percentage of students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential. This annual measure provides important information about how effective educators are in keeping students enrolled in school. The event rate is generally lower than the status rate.

High School Completion Rate: This indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential, irrespective of when the credential was earned.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, **National Center for Education Statistics**, 2011.

Overall, the dropout rate has declined since the 1980s, falling from about 14 percent in 1980 to 8 percent in 2008. Great variances among racial and ethnic groups remain, however. For example, the dropout rate for white students in 2008 was 4.8 percent, compared to 9.9 percent among African-American students, and 18.3 percent for Hispanic students (**National Center for Education Statistics**).

Why Students Drop Out

Research shows two sets of factors may be predictors of whether students will drop out or graduate from high school: One set is associated with the institutional characteristics of their families, schools, and communities; the other set is associated with the individual characteristics of the students themselves (Rumberger and Lim, 2008).

Families, schools, and communities influence students' decisions to drop out in several ways. For example, students living with both parents have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates compared to students in other living arrangements. The employment status of their parents and their parents' incomes play roles, as do parenting practices. These include monitoring a child's progress in school, communicating with the school, and

knowing the parents of their children's friends. Students also are more likely to drop out if they have a sibling who did so (Rumberger and Lim, 2008).

Characteristics of schools, including resources, structural features, composition of the student body, and policies and practices, also play a role in whether students drop out. Living in high-poverty neighborhoods is not necessarily detrimental to completing high school, but living in an affluent neighborhood can be beneficial to school success (Rumberger and Lim, 2008). *Education Week*'s 2011 edition of ***Diplomas Count*** found that 25 districts across the country—led by public school districts in New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami, and Chicago—accounted for 1 in every 5 nongraduates for the class of 2011.

In addition, students have said their reasons for dropping out include:

- Their classes were not interesting;
- They were not motivated or inspired to work hard;
- They were failing in school and could not keep up with school work;
- They had missed too many days and could not catch up on their work;
- They had repeated a grade;
- They had to work;
- They became a parent;
- They had to care for a family member;
- They were doubtful they could meet their school's graduation requirements even if they had put in the necessary effort (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison, 2006).

Grade retention—being "held back" or flunked—has also been found to be highly correlated with dropping out. Studies have examined the effect of retention in elementary school or the combined effects of retention in elementary and middle school. Thirty-seven of the 50 of those analyses found retention in elementary and/or middle school increased the odds of dropping out of high school (Rumberger and Lim, 2008).

Likewise, a **2011 report** by a prestigious panel of the National Academies, an institution formed by Congress to give advice on scientific matters, links high school exit exams to a 2 percentage-point decrease in graduation rates nationwide.

Addressing the Problem

Dropout-prevention strategies vary widely. Prevention begins in part by identifying struggling students early and targeting them for assistance. Infrequent attendance, behavior infractions, and course failure—the "ABC's" of dropout—more accurately predict whether a student will drop out of high school than do socioeconomic factors and can be used to predict high school graduation as early as the start of middle school. (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010).

Early Warning Systems: In 2007, the Louisiana Department of Education adopted an early warning system created by a local educator and provided it to Louisiana school districts. The system uses warning indicators based on historical data for dropouts, including: attendance, course achievement, behavior, and age. Teachers receive information about at-risk students twice a month (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010).

Dropout Recovery: Dropout prevention and recovery programs emphasize multiple pathways to graduation. Over the last decade, at least 31 states have expanded alternative education possibilities for students at-risk of dropping out, including those with many absences or who are significantly over age for their grade (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, and Fox, 2010).

Early College High Schools: As of 2010, there were 208 "early college high schools" in 24 states and the District of Columbia serving about 47,000 students. Early college high schools are joint academic programs developed by a local high school and a nearby postsecondary institution that allow all students to earn a high school diploma, plus one to two years of transferable college credit at the same time. The schools boast a 92 percent graduation rate. In 2008, 89 percent of early college graduates pursued some form of postsecondary education that fall, compared with 66 percent of students nationally (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, and Fox, 2010).

Career academies: Another dropout-prevention strategy is small schools or schools within schools that offer career-focused curricula, team teaching, and involvement from the business community. An eight-year study of career academies showed they did not have an impact, positive or negative, on high school completion rates, however the completion rates for students in academies and the schools in which those academies were located would be considered high relative to national averages for similar students in similar schools. This suggests career academies may attract somewhat better prepared or highly motivated students. Still, career academies serve as a viable strategy for keeping students on a course

toward graduating from high school, even though they are not always better at this than other alternatives at the same schools or within their communities. (Kemple, 2008).

A **2008 review** of the research on preventing dropouts by the U.S. Department of Education also identifies key components of effective programs. Besides data-based, early-warning systems, these strategies include: creating more personalized learning environments for students; providing extra support and academic enrichment for struggling students; assigning adult advocates to students deemed to be at risk of dropping out; and providing rigorous and relevant instruction to engage students in learning.

SOURCES

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